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Parallel Stories: The Role of History and Personal Narrative in the Nonfiction Essay // *Masked* (Creative Nonfiction)

Abstract

[From the introduction]

In academia, educators often insist that there is a strict divide between scholarly prose and creative nonfiction. Research and history are true – what has happened is fact. The concern is that perhaps these facts lose their value and veracity when paired with creativity or the personal. However, creative nonfiction – essays in particular - has challenged this view by demonstrating that in fact, research presented with personal experience can actually reveal a deeper meaning or understanding behind both. Our stories are rooted in the personal experiences that bind our day-to-day lives together, and within those experiences are embedded strands of cultural histories from every corner of the world. Our experiences are intertwined with one another, each social encounter being a sort of interwoven fabric of two or more lives meeting and leaving an impression on one another. The challenge for the writer becomes how to tell his or her stories and examine these cultural histories or concepts in a way that engages the reader on different intellectual and emotional levels. They must use a structure in which the personal stories and the historical backstory or cultural concepts maintain their original nature and meaning. Both histories – the individual, personal history and the broader history a writer is relating it to – must remain strong individually and become stronger when presented together. Personal essays, when presented this way, are often stronger and more engaging for the reader, giving them a new lens through which they can examine aspects of their life and culture.

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Parallel Stories: The Role of History and Personal Narrative in the Nonfiction

Essay

and my Creative Nonfiction piece, *Masked*

by Hayley Rozee
English: Creative Writing

Introduction:

In academia, educators often insist that there is a strict divide between scholarly prose and creative nonfiction. Research and history are true – what has happened is fact. The concern is that perhaps these facts lose their value and veracity when paired with creativity or the personal. However, creative nonfiction – essays in particular - has challenged this view by demonstrating that in fact, research presented with personal experience can actually reveal a deeper meaning or understanding behind both. Our stories are rooted in the personal experiences that bind our day-to-day lives together, and within those experiences are embedded strands of cultural histories from every corner of the world. Our experiences are intertwined with one another, each social encounter being a sort of interwoven fabric of two or more lives meeting and leaving an impression on one another. The challenge for the writer becomes how to tell his or her stories and examine these cultural histories or concepts in a way that engages the reader on different intellectual and emotional levels. They must use a structure in which the personal stories and the historical backstory or cultural concepts maintain their original nature and meaning. Both histories – the individual, personal history and the broader history a writer is relating it to – must remain strong individually and become stronger when presented together. Personal essays, when presented this way, are often stronger and more engaging for the reader, giving them a new lens through which they can examine aspects of their life and culture.

As nonfiction writers, we write because we want to tell a story. We want to explore an area of our lives in a manner that opens up the discussion to a broader audience than just ourselves. We also want these stories to not just provide a source of intellectual sustenance for our readers, but strike a common note in their own lives. As Christy Wampole once put it, “Banal, everyday phenomena – what we eat, things upon which we stumble, things that Pinterest

us – rub elbows implicitly with the Big Questions: What are the implications of the human experience? What is the meaning of life? Why something rather than nothing?” (3). Everyone seeks the comfort of knowing that they are not alone, regardless of what we have experienced in our lives. “At the core of the personal essay,” writes Phillip Lopate in his introduction to *The Art of The Personal Essay*;, “is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (xxiii). The essay is a sort of emotional remedy; it is a natural human necessity to feel connected, to feel that we are not alone and that our experiences are not one-offs. We use others’ experiences as references when it comes to finding the meaning in or the resolutions to our own situations. Readers and writers turn to the essay as a comfort, a reassurance, and a reminder that someone somewhere has been what we’ve been through, or worse.

The personal essay is not a new means of creating this sense of unity. Seneca was writing his essay “On Noise” - assessing the role of noise in his everyday life and the human search for peace of mind - sometime before his death in 65 AD (Lopate 3). In the 15th century, essayist and the arguable father of the essay, Michael De Montaigne, with his facetious and sarcastic overtones, further explored the commonalities of everyday life. His pieces addressed memory, lying, aging, and death to name a few. In his piece “Of Liars”, he begins his piece by admitting that he is victim to a common fault – poor memory: “There is not a man living whom it would so little become to speak from memory as myself, for I have scarcely any at all, and do not think that the world has another so marvelously treacherous as mine” (Cotton). He asserts that a poor memory, is perhaps, a good thing. It makes one quiet, “not so talkative ... Had mine been faithful to me, I had ere this deafened all my friends with my babble, the subject themselves arousing and stirring up the little faculty I have of handling and employing them, heating and distending my discourse, which were a pity” (Cotton). One also cannot remember their injuries or pain nor can

He examines the issue of lying as the piece progresses, separating the topic into two categories, the “untruth” and “lie”. Montaigne eventually suggests a couple of outlandish, and therefore very Montaigne-esque solutions. Firstly, that “We are not men, nor have other tie upon one another, but by our word. If we did but discover the horror and gravity of it, we should pursue it with fire and sword” (Cotton). Secondly, any children that have been cursed with the habit of lying should have the fault “severely whipped out of them, both in their infancy and in their progress, otherwise they grow up and increase with them” (Cotton). Montaigne presented an everyday fault or negative characteristic of the human nature, using wit and satire to hold the readers’ attention and invite them to relate to the overall argument, if not word-for-word.

Contemporary writers have broadened the possibilities of the form, experimenting with different arrangements and styles. They have also zeroed in on social or cultural issues that have been around for centuries and provide unique criticisms of these issues. Echoing earlier writers like Montaigne, who himself published a piece called “In Praise of Follow: An Essay on Drunkenness”, Frank O’Connor touches on the subject of alcohol in his piece “In Quest of Beer” - exploring his father’s affection for the drink while simultaneously examining the Irish’s high regard for pubs and drinking. He uses pubs and alcohol as a springboard for his examination of his own feelings towards the Irish pastime but also as a cultural critique of the ways in which the Irish and English value alcohol and how it has become a staple of both heritages.

The definition of a cultural critique could be considered any piece of writing that closely examines any facet of society or culture and raises questions or concerns. What aspects of our lives warrant a discussion or a closer look? Countless essayists have approached the cultural critique in a manner of ways, each finding unique connections between these topics and experiences within their own lives. Originally, cultural critiques were reserved for the

philosophers or moralists – positions held dominantly by men. But essayists, men and women alike, have adopted the genre and turned it into something quite remarkable. More contemporary issues are being examined, seemingly banal every day events that are actually veiling hidden meanings or intentions. Cultural critiques are still very much a desired and readable form of the essay for this reason. The troubling or intriguing aspects of our cultures or societies can often evoke new thoughts on the things that have happened to us; we may think about these events differently given a cultural aspect to use as a lens.

Every writer, Philip Gerard suggests in *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*, chooses to write on topics they have pondered over countless times, lost sleep over, or even sought psychological help for when they couldn't find the meaning themselves or come to terms with their experiences. They may then take a memory that serves some significance for them and present it within a bigger frame for analysis. This is where the essay achieves a level of intimacy unique to the form. In writing a personal essay, as writer and Editor of the 1997 edition of *The Norton Book of Personal Essays* Joseph Epstein believes, “two of the chief ways an essayist can prove interesting are, first, by telling readers things they already know in their hearts but have never been able to formulate for themselves; and, second, by telling them things they do not know and perhaps have never even imagined” (20). The writer opens him or herself up to their audience with sincere honesty, “all masks removed” and “with shameless subjectivity” (18). This, according to Epstein, “gives the personal essay both its charm and its intimacy” (18). This sense of intimacy, when paired with history, creates a unique connection. Suddenly, as readers, we are becoming acquainted with a historical event or concept that we may never have otherwise had an opportunity to become familiar with. At the same time, we are becoming intimate with the writer in sharing this moment of exploration.

This desire to share one's experiences while critiquing a concept or aspect of historical or cultural significance is also a common mode of approach for authors like Joan Didion. Didion not only explores the basic human experiences that are the foundation of our day-to-day encounters but, like Frank O'Connor, offers these personal experiences in the form of cultural criticism. In her piece "I Can't Get That Monster Out of My Mind" she presents a heavy criticism of Hollywood as a romanticized and nonexistent concept. Didion discusses Hollywood's roots as a systematic monster and seems to disagree with its glamorization in the 1950s as the place for filmmakers and actors to be. "In the popular imagination," Didion writes, "the American motion-picture industry still represents a kind of mechanical monster, programmed to stifle and destroy all that is interesting and worthwhile and 'creative' in the human spirit. ... The System not only strangles talent but poisons the soul, a fact supported by rich webs of lore" (150). In some places, her stance on the topic seems ambiguous; while there is only a smidgeon of personal reference, she takes a concept that many people are familiar with and flips it on its head, showing the dark underbelly of a system that has undergone extensive alterations over the past decades. She explains, "Virtually every movie made is an independent production – and is that not what we once wanted? Is that not what we once said could revolutionize American movies? The millennium is here, the era of 'fewer and better' motion pictures, and what have we? We have few pictures, but not necessarily better pictures" (152). Didion predominantly uses casual language, and an informal mode of organization to present a lot of information and significant names related to the life and times of Hollywood. Amongst the facts and figures, she conveys her own commentary as more of an undertone than a direct presentation. This is seen in statements such as "What is surprising is that the monster [what "Hollywood" used to be] still haunts Hollywood itself – and Hollywood knows better, knows

that the monster was laid to rest, dead of natural causes, some years ago” (151). Both her underlying opinion on the matter and the facts she presents maintain their respective importance and meaning while still complementing one another.

Like Didion, I wanted to explore a subject that was engaging, thought-provoking, but most importantly, familiar to my readers. But it wasn’t simply attention I was seeking for my subject – I also wanted to elicit from my readers a sense of curiosity and a desire to explore identity via a unique yet effective means. My creative piece was born from both an eagerness to engage myself and to engage others in a cultural criticism of a holiday that most people in this country have participated in at one point in their life. A holiday where we can be anything or anyone we want with a simple mask and a bit of imagination, be it an expression of our fears or our desires. Halloween is a holiday that has always been a day to visually express my sense of identity as a female human living on this planet. It has seen my costume preferences change, as well as the changes in the exterior forces that molded those preferences. It stood by as I struggled to conceive why my mother and other women in society grew so concerned when I wanted to portray a male character. The challenge then became how to present the cultural subject and my personal memories together and yet separate.

I had been reading the works of Eula Biss in a Creative Nonfiction writing course, from her book *Notes From No Man’s Land*. In her book, Biss presented several pieces that challenge the question of identity – what does it mean to be American? Who are we in the context of our current lives and in the context of our family’s past or culture? Biss’ piece “Land Mines” in particular presents a cross-section of both personal experience and historical and cultural context. “Land Mines” looks at the relationship between slavery and the educational system through the lens of Biss’ own experiences as a teacher. She uses the common fear towards children felt by

educators as a comparison to the way Northerners feared freed slaves coming north for education (46). In this piece, her personal experiences and the historical facts follow one another paragraph-by-paragraph – there are no breaks between the two, leaving the reader little time for air or to process both timelines. While this may seem as if it would be overwhelming, the historical context and the personal anecdotes still flow fluidly from one to the other thanks to the two subjects’ relationship to one another. At first, the treatment of freed slaves within the education system and Biss’ personal account of rowdy school children don’t *seem* connected; but when presented with both stories at once, the reader is left to extract the connection on their own. Additionally, both her personal accounts of teachers fearing their students and the historical examples of Northerners fearing freed slaves coming north each preserve their natural meaning while still accommodating one another.

Initially I formatted my piece similarly to the formats Biss used in her piece – I juxtaposed historical and cultural facts amongst my personal experiences without line breaks separating the two. For instance, my original first draft opened with a general history of Halloween – where it originated, where it has been since its emergence in the American social sphere. From there I had a few pages dedicated to my personal experience, each woven between historical and anthropological snippets about the tradition of costuming. Each paragraph followed tight after the last, and all in all the mechanical structure gave it a more academic feel than creative. But upon reading another one of Biss’ pieces, I began to question this format and experiment with one that required the reader to process my story and the information I was presenting in a more engaged and challenging manner. But it was also crucial that it didn’t feel too academic – I didn’t want my reader to feel locked into a sociology classroom. I wanted to make my reader think, not just read, about an American tradition that has morphed the way we

present ourselves, even if it is only for one night a year. And in order to achieve this, I needed a format that demanded that the reader perform a sort of dual-consciousness.

In her opening piece “Time and Distance Overcome”, Biss alternates using line breaks between sections to jump from one piece of information to another. She begins with a simple historical fact – *New York World*’s reaction to Alexander Graham Bell’s first demonstration of the telephone in 1876, and her statement that “The world was not waiting for the telephone” (3). The sections that follow trace Bell through his promotion and encouragement of the phone line system. From there she presents straight historical facts from her research, without commentary, on the public’s reactions, the constant fuss over the phone lines obstructing the views of the countryside. Over the course of the piece, Biss slowly drives the reader towards a second viewpoint towards the telephone pole system – its role in the countless lynchings that took place in the United States from 1898 through the early-mid twentieth century. As a reader, this format forced me to follow two parallel stories at once – the history of the telephone and the history of lynchings in the South. This sense of duality was enticing; unlike in most of the pieces I had read, “Time and Distance Overcome” kept me engaged almost by force, but it was with an assertiveness that left me with a feeling of exhilaration. It placed me in the position of not just a reader, but an active reader.

After reading Biss’ book, I reworked my essay into its second incarnation, giving it an extreme makeover both in format and language. I broke up my personal memories and the social history of Halloween costumes into sections that alternate for the first eight or nine pages. For example, my opening page now began with a scene from a recent segment of ABC’s *What Would You Do?*, with a young boy asking his mother to buy him a princess costume for Halloween. From there, I slipped into a brief history of Halloween costumes, slowly building up to a

sociological examination of the tradition. Approximately half way through, I delve more deeply into personal experience, my family's reactions to my wanting to be male characters year after year. On page nine I address the first time I was mistaken for a boy, perhaps not coincidentally also the first year I became more conscious about what the women in my family thought about my costume choices. I was trick-or-treating up the road from my Northeast Portland home, sometime during elementary school, when I stepped up to an elderly couple's house. I write, "The wife held the screen door open with one hand while the other beckoned me closer with a package of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. The closer I came to the brick house the more delighted she became. She called over to her husband, who was lounging in an armchair in front of the tv, telling him to come look at my costume. 'Come see this – isn't he darling?'" (10). Today I remember next to nothing of how this made me feel, though I do remember not quite understanding how the woman could think I was a boy. I recall telling my mom this news when I got home, and noting a hint of alarm in her expression. Now I question why many adults are alarmed when their child is mistaken for the wrong gender – "Now I think back to the boy and girl in *What Would You Do?*, of the adults that appear worried that this would happen more often if not stopped soon. Was there a similar worry that I, too, would continue these habits, perhaps sparking an unwanted reputation amongst people who didn't really know us? As if this mislabeling would cause problems within my social interactions later in my life or could signal an undesirable path down which I would advance?" The alternating pattern of my piece breaks in a couple of places, one being on page ten, where I go from discussing my high school costume choices to a more recent class discussion here at Pacific. But here is where I begin to wind everything together, to show that an experience is a common experience. Though these are my personal experiences, they are not necessarily isolated incidents.

By dividing sections up this way, I adopt Biss' intent to urge the reader to comprehend in a manner they are not familiar with, and at first may not be comfortable with. For some, as both writers and readers alike have argued, this format can induce a psychological whiplash. But if performed correctly, the reader instead transcends the regular role of being a reader and instead becomes an *active* reader – consciously apart of the piece and its message and coerced into making the connections on their own. By the end of my piece, this alternating pattern has transformed into a unique format, winding down to the core of what many creative nonfiction writers tackle in their own work – the desire to express a concern or demonstrate a social or cultural issue in a manner that is as reflective for them as it is for their audience.

Conclusion:

When a nonfiction writer sits down to tell his or her story, he or she is faced with a hefty quantity of obstacles the reader must first try to make sense of. What is the story they are trying to tell? What does this story mean to them? And finally, how do they format their story in a framework that informs the reader while still remaining true to their story's innate meaning or importance? When I tell my reader about Halloween costumes – about my donning pointy ears and a homemade Science Officer uniform as Spock or a suit, oversized shoes, and a short mustache as Charlie Chaplin – I want to be assured that they will make a connection with their own life. What that connection is, I do not know, but the answer relies on perception – I can attempt to make my readers think one thing or another, but there is always the risk of their interpretation completely missing the point. If I can open a reader's eyes by pointing out an aspect of our culture that is both actively and passively playing a role in children's development and our own sense of identity, I want to do that in a manner that gives them a new lens to look through. I hope to be able to achieve that with the aid and influence of pieces by writers like Eula

Biss, Frank O'Connor, and Joan Didion.

Creative Piece: Masked

"You can't be a princess."

"Please, mom, I really want to be a princess."

With just a few weeks until Halloween, an intriguing video floats around on Tumblr. A young boy stands in a costume shop in New York with his mother, who is desperately trying to convince him what to be for Halloween. A dozen suggestions are thrown around, each shot down and evoking more desperation from the mother.

The boy persists, lifting a Belle costume from the rack and holding it up. "Mom, I want this. Please?"

“No. You don’t understand what’s wrong with this. Girls wear princess costumes, not boys.”

Another woman and her son approach, eavesdropping intently to the conversation before putting in their own two cents.

“I think that you can’t really wear a princess costume. I know you like it, but that’s for a girl. And you’re not a girl right?” Her tone is sweet, only subtly condescending, obviously not wanting to hurt the boy’s feelings. She murmurs to the mother that it’s just a phase, trying to comfort her and suggesting that her own son grew out of a similar phase.

The mother and her son in the scenario are actors. The video is of one of ABC News’ recent segments of *What Would You Do?*, an undercover show that explores how bystanders react to everyday situations that don’t often get addressed. The actors are a part of an experiment. So what’s the focus? Addressing one of society’s most taboo topics, an issue that doesn’t even have a proper name. Beyond the final evening of October, this issue is typically called cross-dressing and entails an endless list of negative connotations in society, including an association with transsexuals, a commonly satirized community in American culture. If people can’t tell what gender you are and get a firm grasp on it, you are a spectacle – an anomaly.

The subjects of the experiment are the other customers, such as a woman – a fellow mother - who approaches and attempts to persuade the boy that his desire to be a princess is wrong, and “just a phase” that will eventually pass, but only with encouragement from his mother. Several other customers fall for the ploy, each offering his or her own input on the situation. Most of them suggest more masculine Halloween costumes, like ninjas, Spiderman, or police officers. The young actor turns them all down, much to the women’s distress. He wants to be a princess.

The word *Halloween* derives from the Middle English *hallowen* (hallowed, sacred) and the progressive contraction of *evening* to *even* to *e'en* ¹. Halloween is believed to have been brought over to the United States by Irish immigrants in the 1840s after the potato famine and was originally characterized by spiritual celebrations of the deceased, Fall-themed feasts, and morning and afternoon religious – namely Catholic - ceremonies. It has come a long way from these traditional feasts, the tales of ghouls and black cats, and the communal activities and gatherings originally associated with the holiday. What we have come to understand as Halloween today is predominantly a consumerist holiday, a time when decorations go on sale a month or more in advance and costumes fly off the shelves of Party Cities, Targets, Walmarts, and Goodwills across the country. Apart from being a pageant for consumerists, Halloween has become a “cultural Frankenstein” ², says David J. Skal, author of *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. As a society, we have turned the holiday into a stew of various cultural norms and conceptual ideas, adding elements and heightening the gore, gradually eliminating the religious aspects of the holiday. Traditional Catholic Halloween practices, for example, typically included dressing as angels or demons as reflections on their faith. Today, Halloween is slowly becoming less about the curiosity and wonder of the supernatural or

1

Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 25.

2

Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 20

religious, and more about how exactly one celebrates the holiday. And with this emphasis comes a rise in the importance of “masquerading”.

There is little documentation for Halloween masking before 1900, though masquerading was associated with the various holidays that led to Halloween – “the carnival celebrations preceding Lent, the mumming and cross-dressing associated with Christmas/Saturnalia, the masked beggars of Guy Fawkes Day, and so on”³. Initially, costumes had nothing to do with the Halloween tradition. But the twentieth century saw distinct changes in what costuming meant within society. From 1900 to 1930 costumes became a key element of the holiday, a time when “the primary treat associated with Halloween was the prospect of attending a themed costume party, which were hosted for children and adults alike”⁴. Costuming became an even more significant piece of the puzzle with the tradition of Trick-Or-Treating. Trick-Or-Treating itself is believed to have derived from the “penny for the Guy” practice in England on the 5th of November, when Guy Fawkes Day festivities included begging and dressing up in costumes. There is also a belief that costuming came out of certain medieval practices of celebrating All Hallows’ Day with a procession around the local church, during which it was common for people to dress as angels, patron saints, and devils.

One theme that emerged in the early-mid twentieth century was the use of Halloween costumes as a means of celebrating or living vicariously through a public or fictional figure. With each passing social phase, figures like King Tut, Elvis Presley, and Sonny & Cher became almost

3

Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 34

4

Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 42.

default costume ideas in the 20th century. For many American kids during the fifties and sixties, Halloween represented the personal possibilities of the postwar era. “There was the idea of being anybody you wanted to be ... The question that was always posed around Halloween as a kid was, ‘Who are you going to be?’ It was always extremely liberating,” Says Rochelle Santopaolo, a baby boomer and now editor of *Happy Halloween*, a magazine for holiday enthusiasts⁵.

According to Skal, “befitting the tumultuous politics of the time, one of the most popular Halloween masks of 1974 was not a traditional gargoyle but that of the disgraced United States president, Richard Nixon”⁶. For one night, you could be a rock star, a political figure, or any other celebrity. You could be ironic or satirical. You could be realistic or cartoonish. You could even step beyond the human realm and become any ferocious mythological or horrific creature like a werewolf, a vampire, or leprechaun. Emphasis was put on the subject, not so much the appearance of the costume or necessarily who was in it. Unless the gender didn’t match the wearer.

Out of this tradition grew a standard – only costumes that correlate with the gender of the wearer became acceptable. Could a girl dress up as Richard Nixon? Could a guy pull off Princess Leia’s cinnamon roll doo? Could a girl even dress as a werewolf or a police officer, without feeling inclined to trim off half the fabric to show a little flesh? Not without the stigma that would correspond. Once I reached the age where I could decide my own Halloween costumes for myself, I would soon learn that some adults would shift uncomfortably at the idea of me dressing

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Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 56.

6

Skal, David J. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002. 3.

up as anything but a girl. These gender distinctions have become embedded in our culture, extending beyond Halloween and seeping into our natural assumptions about how boys and girls should behave. Halloween has essentially become a stage, not so much the enforcer of such gendered norms, but a night when these engrained ideas come to life and are paraded for the world to see.

Somewhere, buried in one of my family's many tubs of photos, is a picture of one of the first Halloweens I ever dressed up in a costume – as a penguin. I'm in my mom's arms, positioned beside my two older sisters, who are dressed as a witch and a ghoul. I must have been two or maybe three – too young to look up at my parents and say "Really?" It's the age when most parents take advantage of the absurd and cutesy costumes offered for toddlers. Pumpkins, peapods, bananas, Life Savers and other inanimate objects that are somehow seen as suitable for Halloween line the shelves and racks of costume or party suppliers. Spirit Halloween, one of the more popular and frequented Halloween costume resources, offers a wide variety of toddler and infant costumes, ranging from the more understandable Cookie Monster to the more questionable "Lil' Hot Dog Bunting Costume". Whether a boy or girl is fresh out of the womb or well on his or her feet, there's a costume for them.

The three-year-old to five-year-old range is when things really start to get scary. Welcome to the realm of short skirts and frills for girls and Ninja headbands and fake padded muscles for boys. This is the age when children become more consciously aware of fictional characters and the stereotypes they possess. They learn to acknowledge these stereotypes, conditioned by their adult superiors – along with television, books, film, music, and even chain stores like Abercrombie & Fitch and Hollister - to distinguish the girly from the boyish. From these

influences we get the typical young boys, who tend to want to look buff, strong, and powerful like a Power Ranger or the Hulk. Girls likewise tend to adopt the prettier looks, opting for the Disney Princess gowns, faerie wings, or feminine insects like butterflies and ladybugs that show off their arms and legs.

Journalist Peggy Orenstein is one mother who has had to face the reality that Disney princesses have had an overwhelming effect on young girls. She devoted her entire book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, to the issue. Little girls are bombarded with images of pink, motherhood, and beauty on a daily basis. Orenstein admits to initially refusing to subject her daughter, Daisy, to the pressures from the media and society to let her form her own identity and understanding of what being a girl really means. But mothers like Orenstein find these images of ideal girlhood practically unavoidable in any space of family everyday life – in the toys their daughters play with, in the friends she interacts with, even in the most unlikely aisles of the supermarket, like the shampoo aisle where a young girl must decide between the bubble gum-scented shampoo with the Barbie on it or the berry-scented bottle with Batman on it. Orenstein offers the example of one shopping trip with Daisy that lays out just how present these sorts of confrontations are. During the trip, Daisy points out Cinderella Band-Aids, Cinderella paper cups, Cinderella notebooks, and far more, each item bearing the likeness and colors of the Disney princess. Beneath this strict social pressure, young girls might be left wondering if they are wrong to feel differently than what society thinks girls should feel, a fear that Orenstein undoubtedly felt when raising Daisy. As Orenstein says, “As with all of us, what I want for my daughter seems so simple: for her to grow up healthy, happy, and confident, with a clear sense of her own potential and the opportunity to fulfill it. Yet she lives in a world that tells her, whether

she is three or thirty-three, that the surest way to get there is to look, well, like Cinderella”⁷.

Female costume options only apply more of this pressure. Young girls are exposed to hyperfeminize and overly sexualized costumes, a theme even present with the princess dresses that place them within the ideal feminine label – someone physically fit and attractive, and waiting for their Prince Charming.

Growing up, I later realized as a teenager, my choices in attire were somewhat unsettling for the adults in my life. I didn’t like to wear dresses or skirts. I preferred Legos and Hot Wheels over Barbies, and I often had a tighter circle of male friends than I did female friends. I wanted to be a basketball player, maintained friendships with mostly male imaginary friends, and spent many afternoons flinging sand over my shoulder in the makeshift sandbox my dad built for me in the front yard, burying my Kids Meal toys and performing valiant rescues. I never did recover my yellow Power Ranger. When I reached adolescence, my mom and sisters made efforts to try and get me into more girly things like makeup and dresses. My mom would take me to Khol’s or Old Navy and encourage me to pick out something more form-fitting or feminine. When my two older sisters left home, I ended up with some of their old clothes – skirts, dress shirts, tank tops, blouses - most of which were donated to the Goodwill without me even trying them on. I clung to my band t-shirts and jeans like lifelines, often using the excuse that something didn’t fit comfortably just to avoid having to wear it.

Eventually my sisters dropped out of the effort to make me more feminine. They gradually dropped the light jokes, the points about how I should wear more skirts or put on a bit

of makeup every morning. They eventually became my primary support to be exactly who I was – to dress how I wanted, regardless of what society expected of me. Beyond the expectations engrained in the traditional beliefs my mom and the other female adults in the family maintained, my sisters settled into their liberal attitudes more comfortably. Lindsay started openly supporting Gay Rights, and Tiffany began reading into Women’s Studies and American History and starting up conversations and debates on the subjects whenever she could. When I wanted to be Jack Sparrow for Halloween in 9th grade, Lindsay bought me a beaded wig and Tiffany bought me a wristband that resembled one Jack Sparrow wore. With a smile that wanted to object my mom offered little input, but told me I looked like a “good” pirate when I gave my costume a test run.

The pressures to act more my own gender weren’t limited to my household. When I made my second visit to England after my high school graduation, my aunt -- my mom’s sister -- sat me down and told me I was crossing my legs wrong.

Don’t get me wrong – I love my aunt. And I knew she was partly only pulling my leg. But we had this conversation one morning during the trip nonetheless:

“Ladies cross their legs like this.” She demonstrated by hooking her left leg over her right knee and sitting up straight on the sofa beside me. She stuck her nose into the air and folded her hands over her lap for good measure, her eyes closed as she worked to restrain a smile.

I simply laughed, my legs remaining crossed just as they were – my right leg horizontal over my left knee, in what she called a “manly” style. Men only sit like that because they can’t sit the other way, she told me. I told her I was more comfortable this way. Nevertheless, I humored her, folding my legs as she’d shown me, except I didn’t sit up straight. Instead I slouched against the couch as she continued to insist my posture wasn’t ladylike. After a good fifteen minutes of this, she let up, heading into the kitchen to put on the tea while my mom

prepared for a day of shopping in town. When I found myself alone in the living room, I straightened my leg back into the horizontal position.

To those I have told this story, it's a bit absurd. But *some* part of my subconscious must have listened, must have believed her when she said I was sitting the wrong way, not how a young lady *should* be sitting. Because after that day, I rarely sat in the “manly” position again. Without meaning to, I would shift my leg to hook it over my opposite knee. I often find myself folding my hands in my lap. A conditioned response to criticism from someone who didn't want me to behave unnaturally.

The boy in *What Would You Do?* disappears into the back of the shop, returning a short time later with the sparkly Belle costume pulled over his plaid shirt and denim jeans. He poses proudly, eager for his mother's reaction. Stunned, the mother actress pretends to be almost embarrassed at her son's choice in costume. With each mother who approaches, the boy shoots down all of their attempts at persuading him into a masculine costume. Finally, the show's crew changes it up. A young actress takes the boy's place, her eyes set on a Spiderman costume.

At first, the reactions are very much the same. All of the women who approach the scene seem to condemn the girl's desire to dress up like a boy. Even other small children in the store exclaim that the princess costume the boy wants to buy is for girls, pulling a face and taking on a judgmental tone. One woman tells the young girl that she would much rather see her in a pretty dress, and that the girl can only be Spiderman one time – but she could be a princess twenty-four hours a day. The same woman goes as far as to suggest to the mother that she should start “breaking her out of it”, expressing a fear that these habits could be early signs of something

highly socially unacceptable down the road. But what identity is that? And why is it such an unnerving possibility?

All of the adults who condemn the girl's desire to dress as Spiderman seem to express this very common fear: the fear of a future ambiguous or confused gender identity or even more daunting - of the individual being gay. The final woman to approach, a young woman in her mid-twenties, finally brings "it" into a clearer light. She tells the host and the camera crew, "You want people to start being more open-minded. I just saw the way she was so worried about her kids turning gay. Even though she didn't literally say the word 'gay' ... Either way they're still you're child. And unfortunately there's a lot of people that turn their back on them because of their sexual orientation, and that's something that breaks my heart". This is what the mothers insinuate the children must be broken out of. As if it was just as easy as breaking them out of chewing their fingernails or farting at the dinner table. As if this one day out of the year could mean a lifetime of socially unacceptable choices. Maybe it's the fear of the boy and girl losing their place in society as a male and a female, thrown off their path towards motherhood and male dominance. And it all starts with choosing between Belle and Spiderman.

Most costumes in the early 20th century were homemade using paper and scraps of old clothing. *The Dennison Bogie Book* of 1926, an illustrated guide to homemade decorations for the Halloween and Thanksgiving season, suggested a simple paper type of costume referred to as the *slip cover*: the "most popular kind of costume because it is so simple and inexpensive to make and because it is equally appropriate for both boys and girls"⁸. When children couldn't

afford proper masks or costumes, what they did have were their bare hands and a few art supplies. This freedom to create your own costume seems to suggest that with a bit of imagination, kids could create whatever identity they wanted, and for one night could pass as whomever they pleased without it being questioned. The whole point of Halloween is to adopt the persona of someone else - and yet, we're so tightly bound to gender roles that are distinct boundaries in even just doing that.

One of the first costumes I can remember choosing for myself was a clown. We bought the rainbow striped one-piece outfit at a party supply shop in Portland, with a large plastic ring like a hula hoop inside of it that made me look like 18th century royalty. I smeared white makeup across my face and slipped a multicolored wig over my braided blonde hair. My mom painted red lipstick across my lips and stuck a fuzzy red foam ball on the tip of my small nose. I wore normal, scuffed sneakers, as it rained that year and my mom didn't see the point in getting nice shoes all muddy.

We recycled the clown costume the following year. But this time, the inner ring had to go. I also went without the lipstick and pinned a bowtie below my chin. This became the first year that I was ever mistaken for a boy. I remember approaching the doorstep of an elderly couple down my street. The wife held the screen door open with one hand while the other beckoned me closer with a package of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. The closer I came to the brick house the more delighted she became. She called over to her husband, who was lounging in an armchair in front of the tv, telling him to come look at my costume. "Come see this - isn't he darling?"

I remember a hint of alarm and surprise on my mom's face, and the many subsequent Halloweens for which she suggested I wear something feminine. Now I think back to the boy

and girl in *What Would You Do?*, of the adults who appear worried that this would happen more often if not stopped soon. Was there a similar worry in my household that I, too, would continue these habits, perhaps sparking an unwanted reputation amongst people who didn't really know us? As if this mislabeling would cause problems within my social interactions later in life or could signal an undesirable path down which I would advance?

When I was in 7th grade, I remembering having a conversation with my mom about why she'd raise a fuss every Halloween when I wanted to be a male character. It was a point she would again raise when I wanted to be a mime, Charlie Chaplin, Mr. Spock, and Dracula, and had no interest whatsoever in dressing as female characters. It was also a discussion that sparked whenever I felt more comfortable dressed in male or gender neutral attire, constantly surrounded by the implication that such comfort was wrong.

"Because you're a beautiful girl, that's why. Why not be a beautiful girl character?"

These are words that I remember hearing on many occasions, most often when I choose jeans over a skirt in the summertime, or declined her offer to straighten my hair or apply makeup to my face. They were the words that, when repeated enough, began to convince me that I was wrong for not being girly enough. By my junior and senior years of high school, I had begun to stuff myself into the framework that I had been encouraged to fit into for years. I kept a makeup kit, I tried to straighten my hair at least once a week, and I stopped wearing some of the band t-shirts that overwhelmed my drawers. I bought more form-fitting jeans. I found myself in the wake of a breakup, a relationship that I hadn't really been particularly satisfied with, but that gave me the sense that I was satisfying the social expectations of a successful female, at least within the high school territory.

For Halloween that year, I was a Pink Lady. On the one hand, I didn't mind so much. Grease had been a favorite of mine since I was a kid – I had a particular fondness for Rizzo – and it would be an inexpensive costume. But there was nothing feminine about it. My dad Sharpied on the Pink Ladies logo on the back and my name on the right breast, and with a pair of jeans and a plain top, I was ready for what would be one of my last years trick-or-treating. I got away with being a female character that didn't require a feminine outfit.

During a discussion in my Sociology class Junior year of college, my professor asked the girls in the class why they liked to dress up in more sexualized costumes than they normally dare to wear on a daily basis. He brought up someone's Tumblr page, which displayed a sample of the contrasting Halloween costumes for men and women. The men's costumes, such as Darth Vader and Stewie from *Family Guy*, were distinctly detailed and actually looked like the character they were meant to be. The female equivalent consisted of far less fabric, and in many cases featured only so much as an image of the character on their four-sizes-too-small shirt. The class, and myself, found these images humorous, but they were still disturbing, causing many shakes of the head and "tisks" throughout the class in between the laughter.

One girl raised her hand tentatively, replying to his question, "Because it's our night to go to parties and look good." Another girl, more confident in her response, stated "Because we want to look cute."

"And you can't look cute or good in a non-sexualized costume?" He was careful to avoid the word "slutty," as a student had used earlier in the class to describe one of the costumes. He scrolled further down the page to a sailor costume. The male looked very convincing, dressed in a traditional sailor's uniform with his hands on his hips and a broad grin across his face.

Meanwhile, the women's version consisted of a very tight white skirt, a low-cut striped top that was pulled into a knot at the side to reveal her abdomen, flirty pink lipstick and high heels. She dangled a sailor's hat from her index finger, hip drawn to the side in a seductive stance.

After a brief silence, one of the football players in the front row raised his hand. "Girls use Halloween as an excuse to dress like that. Any other day they would be considered a slut. They like to feel good about themselves, so they dress up on Halloween." They also want, he continued to say, to appear to be the person they want to be or see themselves as on the inside, without being judged by others. They want to exploit their sexual side without any repercussions. Perhaps they feel that as a human of the female gender, this sexuality *should* be expressed, that it's only a part of our nature. But this sort of expression inevitably comes with consequences.

I stared at the back of the student's baseball cap for several moments, thinking back to a recent Halloween when I was Mr. Spock. I had made my own blue science officer shirt, complete with glittery crew badge, and sported a pair of pointy ears I had bought from Hot Topic. I shadowed my eyes with a smoky purple color; I darkened, extended, and tilted my eyebrows. I'd been inspired by a Mr. Spock costume I had seen for sale just days before, but wasn't interested in paying \$30 for. Not even the female alternative was appealing – I didn't like wearing skirts that only went to my knees (or any skirts for that matter), and the tight blue shirt provided in the costume's packaging showed off the midriff, a sight I was fairly certain no one wanted to see on me. I was satisfied with the blue long-sleeve shirt I had found and modified myself, and the black jeans and shoes I'd found to go with it. I didn't need to dress like the women in the photos – to bare my legs, show off my cleavage - to feel good about myself. As I sunk back into my chair, I still felt conflicted – I felt good about myself when I dressed up as a male character, but still felt the pressure to be someone else, someone more feminine or more sexualized.

The show's crew decides to have one more go with their experiment. This time, the mother is approached by the final woman to be observed, the young woman in her twenties. This woman and her friend, much to the narrator's surprise, instead jumps to the aid of the actress daughter, especially when the subject of "breaking her out of *it*" or "nipping *it* in the butt" rises.

"It shows that she wants to be a strong woman," she argues, claiming that perhaps the girl wants to be Spiderman to express her wanting to save people. Her male friend even enthusiastically suggests that the girl try the mask on for size; meanwhile her actress mother is appalled. When the actress mother leaves the scene this time, pretending to be distressed and finished with the girl, leaving the actress daughter alone with the two young customers, the issue of "it" is addressed in a more supportive and compassionate manner. "Your mom is just scared that other people won't accept you. But if you are strong, and you know... you know who you are and you know what you want, then people will respect you for it. ... Know that there are more girls like you."

And in a way, I wish I had been told this years ago, when my mom would give me *that* look when I told her what I was going to be for Halloween. When I told her I would need a bowler hat, a fake mustache, or a suit. When I would feel good about myself, about the reflection in the mirror, but would feel guilty that I wasn't being the girly girl society wanted me to be. But perhaps this world is changing. Our generation is statistically more accepting and open to alternate norms. But the young male onlooker in the costume shop who criticized the young actor for his choice in Halloween costume proves a disturbing reality – these gendered norms are woven into the fabric of our culture, and will always exist so long as they are enforced.

NOTES

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